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A ONE-ACT PLAY AND HOW I COMPOSED IT

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As teachers of English, we can learn a good deal from the experiences of those who write. I have asked Mr. Merrill to outline briefly the genesis and development of his play, The Unused Well. His testimony offers much by way of suggestion to teachers of composition.

—The Editor

The story and the theme of the one-act play to which I later gave the title *The Unused Well*, stole upon me quite unexpectedly. The place and the hour when this happened I recall vividly. I was walking leisurely to church in Salem, Massachusetts, one Sunday morning when the story, quite fresh and astonishingly complete, flashed upon me. It was a novel and a pleasing early morning guest; therefore I entertained it with pleasure. The well struck me as a good symbol, unhackneyed, and suggestive of a small and remote village in New England. Before I had reached church, I had resolved to write out my air-born story in the form of a one-act play.

When I reached home, I made a rough outline of my plot. I then—other occupations claiming my attention—put it aside for the time being. Some days later I set to work in earnest. My first step was to think over the essential rules that govern the construction of a one-act play. I recalled them in some such order as this: First, a one-act play should have a single climax, this climax, or *scène à faire*, is most effective when emotions and intellect coalesce—when there is

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something seen and something done, as the technician would say. Then I recalled the fact that the incidents of the play must be chosen with economy, and must be so arranged as to form a crescendo. In the most successful models of one-act play structure, the dénouement follows speedily on the crucial moment, grows out of it, and shows the readjustment of the characters involved. These and many other rules came readily to my thought. Having given them due consideration, I was ready to start the actual work of writing my play.

The beginning of any story is always difficult to negotiate. In the world of actuality the threads of human experience are so enmeshed that it is well-nigh impossible for any one of us to unravel them. But the skillful story-teller does mankind a service: he selects details and so deftly patterns them that we are able to perceive the relationship between cause and effect. The novelist has more or less time at his command. The writer of the full-length drama has to choose his expository material with greater discrimination because he must tell his tale within the limits of the "two hours' traffic of the stage." The writer of the cameo-like one-act play has to be even more selective in his choice. A one-act play must get under way immediately; leisurely going stories do not fit the drama matrix. Although "Speed, author, speed," is the command, nevertheless clearness demands adequate exposition. The first few speeches of the play must make the situation clear; there must be a look backwards; there must be a look ahead; and, above all, the problem and the interest must be established without delay or the play is foredoomed to failure. Mindful of these facts, I spent a considerable amount of time in planning the beginning.

Personally, I enjoy plays which give me a few moments in which to become oriented to the scene before any character speaks; I therefore had *The Well* begin with pantomime. It seemed perfectly reasonable that Caroline should be occupied with the task of going through her mother's letters, and that she should talk to herself—I have known many people to do so. I wanted to introduce the theme early in the play, so I had Bert come in to report about the well. Country people are prone to talk; I therefore presented the facts of the situation through the conversation between Bert and Caroline.

Having once got a start, I went ahead rapidly; the first draft of the little play was completed in a short time; I again put it aside and did not attempt to make any changes for several days.

When leisure and inclination again chanced to coincide, I returned to my project. The enforced absence had given me a perspective. I perceived that the parts of the play were not always well articulated; that the characterizations had obvious flaws; and that the dialogue was uneven. The language of Bert gave me considerable difficulty. I felt that I had not made his speech sufficiently distinctive. I tried to recall all the quaint expressions that I had heard used by people of his type and station. I collected a generous supply of characteristic words and phrases—more than I could use legitimately. My next difficulty was to spell these words so that the reader would readily get the pronunciation. I consulted the short stories of such excellent writers of New England life as Alice Brown and Mary Wilkins. I found that they differed widely in their use of words, their spelling, and their consistent use either of spelling or idiom. Another difficulty was to decide how many peculiarities of diction would be noticeable in the speech of the father. I was quite sure that Caroline and Harriet would be free from speech eccentricities.

It dawned upon me one day as I was reading the play through that I had not been true in my psychology. I had not stressed sufficiently Harriet's grief over her mother's death, and I had over-emphasized her disappointment over the loss of her position in Los Angeles. I spent a generous amount of time trying to put myself in Harriet's place. When I felt confident that I had an imaginative grasp of the situation, I rewrote or revised a considerable portion of the dialogue.

My custom was to read the play aloud. After one of these readings I concluded that I had used words when actions would tell the story more effectively. An hour or two was spent in effecting changes in the light of this idea. Another day I worked on the play with this question in mind, Does each speech reveal character and help on the plot? At another time I considered the little touches which I had put in for effectiveness. I thought the mention of such details

as the woodwax, the white violets, and the ferns in the window helped to suggest, or reveal, the theme. I called attention early in the play to the couch because it was to come into the drama later on. I knew that it would be in artistic to have Harriet's body brought upon the stage at the last; I realized, moreover, that the sight of the body would take attention away from Eben, who is the dramatic center of interest at the end of the play. I strove constantly for reserve—it is very easy to allow one's emotion to take the bit in its mouth and run away with sane judgment.

I tried the play on a young actress who had had considerable experience on the stage. She insisted that all the speeches that I had given the father after the death of Harriet should be deleted. We discussed the matter for some time, but I could not agree with her. I thought it over after we parted and finally concluded that my first impressions were to be trusted; I therefore left the end as I had first written it.

I am quite certain that if I should put the manuscript away and should come back to it after six months there would be details which I should like to change. The writing of a successful one-act play demands more than a dramatic situation, a good theme, and a knowledge of the rules of dramatic technique; it requires years of practice and of apprenticeship. These facts, however, do not diminish the pleasure that I have derived from my adventure in the field of dramatic composition.

THE UNUSED WELL

SCENE. The living room of a well-to-do, small-town New England home. It is late afternoon of an autumn day. Caroline, a gentle, quiet woman of the middle forties, dressed in deep mourning that makes her look more than customarily pale, sits in front of an old secretary. She is looking over the effects of her mother. The recentness of her mother's death makes the task almost impossible. She has taken a small mahogany box from the open drawer of the secretary, and has lifted the lid. Overcome with grief, she sits for a moment without moving; tears gather in her eyes. Then with a sigh she takes out a package of letters and looks over one or two of them. Again her grief becomes so poignant

that she is unable to go on. She puts the package down and wipes away the tears.

CAROLINE. How can I ever go through all these things? They were so much a part of dear mother that they bring back all the old memories. It seems sacrilege to touch them. (There is a brief pause while she struggles to control her feelings. Realizing, however, that her mother's things must be looked over, she resumes her work. She opens an envelope that contains some old photographs—several of which she examines. One she takes from the rack and looks at and speaks to sadly.) What a pretty girl you were, mother! (After fondly lingering over it, she picks up another photograph, and places it beside the picture of her mother). Harriet favors you in her looks even though she is so like father in most of her ways. She has your sensitive mouth and your wistful eyes. Precious little mother, did Harriet's rash act fill your last days with hours of worry and of gloom? (She puts the photographs back in the envelope, and with a sigh replaces the envelope in the mahogany box. As she does so, the door at the back of the room opens, and Bert, a neighboring farmer, enters.)

BERT. Ken I come in, Miss Caroline? I won't bother ye more 'an a minute.

CAROLINE. Certainly, Bert.

BERT. Jest a message for yer father and then I'm off for home. Tell him I'll be back in the mornin' and go on with the work.

CAROLINE. He is somewhere hereabouts. I'll call him, and you can talk with him yourself.

BERT. Ain't necessary. You ken tell him as good as me. I've uncovered the old well and brought up the rock from the south pasture.

CAROLINE. Shall you be able to finish the job tomorrow?

BERT. I thinks likely. The sun is settin' clear, so m'be we ken count on a good day. However, ye can't always bank on New England weather.

CAROLINE. True! I do hope that it will be pleasant. It's foolish of me, but, for some reason or other, I feel that I shall not be able to settle down to anything until the old well is filled in and got rid of.

BERT. It's a wonder yer father didn't have it filled in years ago.

CAROLINE. Father hates changes, you know.

BERT. Right ye are. Fer be it frum me to say a word agen yer father—a fine man—and lives up to what he b'lieves. Sot in his ways, that's all. But Lordy, that's true of most of us. Inheritance's to blame, I guess. Handed down by our Puritan ancestors. I sometimes think they was overgenerous in their handin'-downs.

CAROLINE. You may be right.

BERT. Most o' the village folk had their wells filled up soon after the town water system was put in. I guess yer's is one of the last in town.

CAROLINE. It is. There are a few over at Middleville still.

BERT. They'll go soon. And they ought to go, too, for an unused well's only a tarnal nuisance. I often thinks of the sermon thet Parson Atwood preached the Sunday after they got the new water system a-goin'. Do ye recall it?

CAROLINE. I don't believe I do.

BERT. Parson Atwood said thet our old foggy notions—"outgrown beliefs" he called 'm—are like outgrown wells; they need to be got red of; for, said he, "they're not only pesky eyesores but they're dangerous." Yer father was so sot in his ways thet he wouldn't have his well tetched.

CAROLINE. Perhaps father did use to appear a little fixed in his ideas. But now that mother's gone he's a changed man. He doesn't seem to have the same desire to keep the old place as it used to be.

BERT. He sure has seemed different since yer ma's death. Her goin' was a great blow. Clever woman—quiet as a lily-pond on a still August day; but, if I do say it, she was a capable one, r'al smart and no mistake.

CAROLINE. Indeed she was, Bert.

BERT. Well do I remember her recitin' pieces at the Grange meetin's, and at church sociables. How everyone doted on hearin' her. R'al dramatic she was, and I weren't the only one thet sed so, not by a long shot.

CAROLINE. (sighing). Mother had many talents for all her retiring disposition.

BERT. I calkilate yer sister Harriet comes natural by her

play-actin' ways. (Caroline looks uncomfortable. Harriet, evidently, is a subject not to be discussed.) Do ye ever hear frum 'er? 'Spose ye must.

CAROLINE. (hesitatingly). Not often.

BERT. I'd like mighty well to see her in thet movin' picture she played in. Ain't never been shown here in town thet I know on.

CAROLINE. I haven't heard of its being here.

BERT. Too bad they can't get it for some Saturday night. I warrant thet it would draw the biggest crowd the old town has had for many moons. But laws, thar's so many of them picture-plays thet thar's no tellin' when it will git around to Ferncroft.

CAROLINE. I guess there are, as you say, a great many picture-plays. I never saw one myself.

BERT. Too bad yer father's so sot ag'in theayters. My! but I'd like to go down to Boston some time or nuther an' see the sights. I've heered say thet the theayters in Boston are as thick as grasshoppers in midsummer. And they tell me thet some o' them playhouses has a bran new different picture every night. Here in the village with a show only one night a week it may be many a Dutch month before we git the picture thet Harriet was took in. (Caroline sighs.)

BERT. Regular fairy tale yer sister Harriet bein' chosen for the comp'ny what was picturin' their play right here in our village.

CAROLINE. Harriet always had a hankering for play-actin'.

BERT. She sure did, and thet New York gal's loss when she took sick here at the Lakecroft Inn was yer sister's gain. Strange how things do come about. The manager told me his very self, thet the minute he sot eyes on Harriet thet he knew she was the one for the play. "Had real picture value"—them was his very words. I s'pose thet she's makin' a great hit, now thet she's a honest-t'-goodness movie-picture player. Located in Californy, if I rekalect.

CAROLINE. Los Angeles, I believe.

BERT. Think o' my actually knowin' a r'al actress—stars they call 'm. Pity yer father feels so sot agen it. She only done what was natural in a woman. You can't blame people

for doin' what they was born ter do, ye know, any more 'an ye can blame cats for chasin' robins when they see 'em.

CAROLINE. (eager to change the subject). Is there any-thing more you wish me to tell father about the well?

BERT. No. I reckon thet's all. (He notices the ferns on the window-ledge.) Them's as fine a lot o' house ferns as ever I sot eyes on. Yer ma was a wonder with 'er plants. Everythin' she tetched grew. Her maidenhair ferns was the envy of all the women in town. Loved to lie here on this comf'able couch—didn't she—where she could look at her ferns and the blue sky yonder.—Wall, I must be a-movin' on my way.

(As Bert starts to go, a man's footsteps are heard approaching.)

CAROLINE. Here's father now, I guess.

(Eben enters. He is a tall, powerful man. His furrowed face shows the traces of recent sorrow. He is stern and quick of speech.)

EBEN. Well, Bert, how is the work progressin'? Did you find stone enough in the old wall down at the foot of the south field?

BERT. Land, yes. Stone aplenty.

EBEN. Well, if you find that you are runnin' short let me know and I'll tell you where you can find plenty more stone. When do you expect to finish?

BERT. I ought t' git through fillin' in by noon t'morrow—or by middle of the 'aternoon, anyway. By the by, there's seven or eight feet of water in thet old well.

EBEN. I want to know! Seven or eight feet of water? I thought that well was dry as a bone.

BERT. No, there's at least seven or eight feet of water, m'be more. I've left the top unkevered. You ken put some boards over it for the night if ye think best. I'll stop an' do it now if ye say the word.

EBEN. There is no need of it, Bert. Nobody ever crosses that part of the garden now my wife's—(he hesitates just a moment) now my wife's gone. While you're here, I'll have a look at what you've done. And if you can spare a few minutes I'll get you to mend a hinge on the door of the cow

barn. If not, you can do it tomorrow after you've finished the work on the well.

BERT. Jest as soon do it now as not. I told m'wife not to expect me till she seen me.

EBEN. It may be gettin' too dark for you to see to fix the hinge. The days get mighty short at this season of the year, and the big elm just at the west of the barn throws a mighty dense shadow.

BERT. It'll be light enough, I reckon. It ain't much of a job.

EBEN. (turning to Caroline). You'd best be lighting up soon.

CAROLINE. Yes, father. (The two men go out.) Filling in the old well by mother's garden. (She sighs, goes to the mantel, and looks sadly at a charcoal picture of her mother.) Dear old mother, why couldn't you have been spared? We need you, oh, we need you! Even your flowers cry out for your tender care. Harriet's becoming a common movie actress crushed your spirit. Poor patient mother. How you used to lie for days here on this old couch by the fire. You wilted like the white violets that grow by the brook in the glen. I suppose I should have let Harriet know when you were so ill. I wish I had sent her word. (She goes to the center table and lights the lamp. As she is doing this the sound of an approaching carriage is heard. The carriage stops.)

CAROLINE. I wonder who can be stopping here. (She looks out of the window.) It's Perkins's rig. There is a woman getting out. (She starts in surprise.) Why, it's Harriet! What can have happened? (A few moments later Harriet enters and stands hesitatingly at the door. She looks worn and anxious. Caroline starts forward as though to embrace her.)

CAROLINE. Harriet, what's wrong? We—I thought that you were in California.

HARRIET. No, Caroline. I have—I have come home.

(Both are obviously constrained and ill at ease.)

CAROLINE. Come home?

HARRIET. (Her voice expresses a weariness that she has not the strength to hide.) Yes, home.

CAROLINE. (seeing how pale she is). You are ill, Harriet?

HARRIET. No, I am not ill. Where is mother?

CAROLINE. (wishing she could evade the truth). Mother—mother's gone.

HARRIET. Gone! What do you mean?

CAROLINE. (realizing that the truth must be told). Mother—died—four weeks ago today.

(Harriet stands like one stunned.)

HARRIET. Mother dead? (Caroline nods her head. Slowly the truth sweeps over Harriet. Her self-possession forsakes her and she sobs.)

CAROLINE. Don't, Harriet, don't.

HARRIET. Mother, my own precious little mother! (Turning to Caroline.) Why, oh, why didn't you send me word?

CAROLINE. (evasively). She was ill only a short time. She never seemed quite herself after you went away.

HARRIET. Poor dear mother needing me, and I so far away!—I cannot believe that she is gone, and that I shall never see her again. My own precious little mother!—You should have telegraphed me. Why didn't you telegraph me? Why didn't you?

CAROLINE. I wanted to—(hesitatingly)—but father—father wouldn't let me.

HARRIET. (incredulously). Father wouldn't let you? Wouldn't let you tell me that mother was ill?

CAROLINE. No.

HARRIET. How heartless of him!

CAROLINE. Don't, Harriet, don't. You will only make bad matters worse.

HARRIET. Did mother suffer much?

CAROLINE. No, she seemed to feel pretty much as usual. Of course, she hadn't been real well for many years.

HARRIET. I know, but I never dreamed that anything serious was the matter.

CAROLINE. She began to fail soon after you went away. At the last she failed rapidly. I don't think she suffered greatly. She didn't seem to. At the end she slipped away, oh, so quietly.

HARRIET. Poor little mother! And father wouldn't let you send for me, even when she was so ill?

CAROLINE. I don't think he realized how sick mother was.

HARRIET. Where is he now?

CAROLINE. Out by the cow barn talking over some business matters with Bert. I am afraid he won't like your being here.

HARRIET. Not like my being in my own home? He is still angry with me?

CAROLINE. Yes.

HARRIET. I thought that he would be reasonable and come to understand my natural desire to live my life in my own way.

CAROLINE. But why have you come back? And how long do you intend to stop?

HARRIET. (ignoring Caroline's first question and speaking hesitatingly.) I have come back to stay, Caroline. But it will never seem like home again now that mother's gone.

CAROLINE. To stay! Come back to stay, did you say?

HARRIET. Yes, I have given up acting.

CAROLINE. You are on a vacation?

HARRIET. No, I have given my work up.

CAROLINE. Given up play-acting?

HARRIET. I am through with it forever.

CAROLINE. Forever? I do not understand. Given it up after the positive stand that you took—after going contrary to father's commands—after all the talk there has been in the village?

HARRIET. Yes.

CAROLINE. But why? Why?

HARRIET. I may as well tell you the truth, Caroline. I am forced to give it up. I'm a failure.

CAROLINE. What are you saying? A failure? I do not understand.

HARRIET. I have failed utterly.

CAROLINE. I can't believe it. It was reported everywhere that the manager said that you were perfect in the part which you played here.

HARRIET. Yes, that is what he said. And that is why he offered me the work in Los Angeles.

CAROLINE. Then what happened?

HARRIET. The fact is, sister, that I waited too long; my chance came too late. It is a bitter truth, but I shall have to face it. I am a miserable failure in the thing I so long to do. How heartless fate is! I was good in the one part, but I cannot adapt myself to other parts. My mind can conceive a character, but my body is stiff, inflexible, and will not respond to my thought. I am absolutely lacking in adaptability. No amount of study or hard work will give it to me. It is too late. Why, oh, why couldn't the chance have come when I was younger! Before I was so old and so set.

CAROLINE. Harriet, you must be mistaken. The manager wouldn't have taken you to California if you hadn't had ability.

HARRIET. There's no mistake, Caroline. The manager himself now frankly admits that I can never succeed no matter how hard I may strive. Why couldn't I have had a chance to develop my talents when I was a girl? But no, father would not let me. The result is just what it always is—what it was in the parable in the Bible—the unused talent is finally taken from us, and we are left like dead trees, sapless and useless. Oh, this New England training, with its inhibitions, its crushing out of all natural desire, all spontaneous, joyous expression, all feeling for art, and all realization of beauty! It leaves one as sterile as our rocky hillsides where the charitable woodwax spreads its golden-yellow flowers in a vain attempt to hide the poverty of the soil.

CAROLINE. But Harriet, what do you propose to do now?

HARRIET. Do? I don't know. Return to the old grind, I suppose, the old stultifying mode of life. Become like mother—a living slave.

CAROLINE. Stay here at home? Think what a stir it would cause. Everyone in the village believes you are a great success. Can you stand the criticism? the humili—(she hesitates.)

HARRIET. Say it—the humiliation.

CAROLINE. And father! What will father say? Will he be willing that you—

(Eben's voice is heard outside.)

EBEN. Caroline, what did Perkins want? I see his rig

stop at the gate. (He enters and stands amazed when he sees Harriet. He neither speaks nor moves.)

HARRIET. (putting out her hand). Father!

(His face gradually becomes hard. He ignores the outstretched hand and says in a cold tone:)

EBEN. You?

HARRIET. Yes, father.

EBEN. Why are you here?

HARRIET. I have come home—home to stay.

EBEN. (turning suddenly to Caroline and speaking with some heat.). You sent for yer sister. You disobeyed my orders.

CAROLINE. No, father, no.

HARRIET. Don't blame Caroline. She obeyed your wishes to the letter. I didn't even know mother was ill—(Her voice trembles.) Oh, father, how could you have had the heart to keep me away from her when she was sick and needed me—how could you be so cruel to me?

EBEN. Cruel to you? How did you treat yer mother? Followin' yer own rash notions, yer insane whims, contrary to my commands and against yer mother's wishes.

HARRIET. Dear mother would have given her permission had she been free. You dominated her so that she dared not express her own will. She understood me, and deep in her heart she sympathized with me.

CAROLINE. Harriet, don't, oh, don't cross father.

EBEN. Keep still, Caroline. (Turning to Harriet). Harriet, you have chosen yer path; follow it. Go back to yer actor folk; go back to yer mammon worship. And may you reap the full harvest of yer sowin.' May you suffer as you have caused yer parents to suffer.

HARRIET. You are not just, father. I have never wilfully caused you a moment's pain, and you know it. You have no right to be so harsh in your judgment. I must live my life in my own way. I have done nothing for which I am ashamed.

EBEN. If you had any sense of decency you would be ashamed.

HARRIET. I have done nothing to make me ashamed.

EBEN. You broke yer mother's heart. She was never the

same after you left. Yer stubborn will and overpowerin' self-love crushed her—yes, they killed her.

HARRIET. How brutal of you to say that. I loved my mother, and could she speak she'd bear me out. Your accusation isn't true.

EBEN. True as gospel—and now you dare show yer face here in the home which you have brought to disgrace and sorrow. You have wilfully caused yer parents to blush with shame—turned yer back on the religion you was brought up in, and mixed with ungodly player folk. You are an unprincipled girl; you—

HARRIET. Stop. You will regret your words—regret them when it is too late. (She hesitates for a moment to master her feelings and then says calmly but with conviction.) Father, I am going to say what I have long thought and yet have kept shut up in my heart because I wanted to keep peace for mother's sake. Now that she is gone there is no reason why I should keep silence any longer. Father, the blame for practically all the discord that there has been in this home belongs to you—no, do not interrupt me—I am reaping your sowing. Mother reaped it; we all have reaped a bitter harvest. You have been a tyrant in this house.

EBEN. A tyrant! How dare you call yer father a tyrant? I have always—

HARRIET. (interrupting him). Yes, a tyrant. You meant well perhaps. Yes, I believe that you did mean well. But you are so narrow in your outlook on life, so shackled by your inherited biased views, that you have no sense of proportion, no real charity, no true sympathy, and little genuine Christianity. You are an autocrat. Your blind despotism crushed mother. It was you who broke her spirit. It was you who—

(Eben who has been too astonished to speak, now gets command of his voice and shouts:)

EBEN. Silence! How dare you talk to yer father in such a manner. It is just as I predicted—these actors are an unprincipled, godless crew, and you have fallen to their level. They have completely turned your brain. Leave this house. Leave it, I say.

HARRIET. Father, listen—

EBEN. Not another word. Go, and never darken these doors again. Do you hear me? (He turns and strides from the room.)

CAROLINE. Oh, Harriet! What have you said? What have you done?

HARRIET. I am sorry—but what I said is true. It had to come out. I was foolish to think that I could ever live here again. The atmosphere stifles me. It slowly crushed and smothered mother; it would crush and smother me, too.

CAROLINE. But what will you do?

HARRIET. Do? I don't know. I cannot remain here, that's certain. I'll find work somewhere. There must be some portion of labor that I can do even though I'm denied the work that I would so love to have performed.

CAROLINE. Perhaps father will relent.

HARRIET. No. And even if he did, it would be the same thing over again. The break had to come. Either one must submit, as mother did, and little by little have the very breath of life crushed out, or else one must go away. To fight is worse than useless. We are not strong enough. There is no hope here, none. You cannot put new wine into old bottles.

CAROLINE. Oh, how terrible it all is! Mother dead, and now you are leaving us again. (Harriet starts to go.) Don't go, Harriet, I beg you.

HARRIET. I must.

CAROLINE. But where?

HARRIET. The Perkinses will take me in for the night and then—and then, I don't know. But anything is better than staying here. I couldn't go through what mother went through. I haven't her patience. I must be free. Good-bye, Caroline. (She takes Caroline's hand and kisses her.) I will go by the garden door, for I don't wish to see father again.

CAROLINE. (weeping). Oh, Harriet, I beseech you, don't go.

HARRIET. (looking fondly at her mother's picture over the fireplace). Good-bye, dear mother; good-bye, dear home. (Harriet goes. Caroline weeps. After a short interval Eben returns.)

EBEN. Don't be foolish, Caroline. Tears won't mend matters.

CAROLINE. But, father, you do not understand.

EBEN. Better than you, my child, far better. Harriet has made her own bed; she must lie in it. Let her go back to her actor folk; let her make a disgraceful show of herself in vile playhouses throughout the country and bring disgrace upon her people if she will. I disown her, and I don't want to hear her name mentioned in my presence again.

CAROLINE. But, father, she is not going back. She has given up acting.

EBEN. Given it up! (Sneeringly). Don't deceive yerself. Her head is completely turned. Ever since that low movie manager came to town and persuaded her to join his cheap troupe she's been a changed person. I wonder that a girl brought up in a God-fearin' home as she's been could so fer forget yerself. They've mesmerized her—completely mesmerized her—they and her so-called success.

CAROLINE. No, father, you are mistaken; Harriet isn't a success—she has failed; she has been discharged.

EBEN. Discharged! Failed! What are you talkin' about?

CAROLINE. The manager says he was mistaken in his judgment of her. He has frankly told Harriet that he now knows that she can never make an actress. She is too old. She is a complete failure.

EBEN. Harriet a failure? A failure at movin' picture actin'? And you say the manager's discharged her?

CAROLINE. Yes, and discouraged and unhappy she came home to stay.

EBEN. Come home to stay? You must be mistaken, Caroline.

CAROLINE. No, father, it is the gospel truth. She told me all about it. She is disillusioned, heartbroken, and ill.

EBEN. Why didn't she tell me?

CAROLINE. You were so hasty she didn't have an opportunity to tell you.

EBEN. Hasty! Well, perhaps I was a bit hasty, but she aggravated me sore.

CAROLINE. You must make allowances for her, father.

The sudden news of mother's death was a great shock to her. Added to her other griefs it is almost more than she can bear.

EBEN. Where is she now?

CAROLINE. She has gone—gone away as you ordered. She thinks the Perkinses will take her in for the night. Where she will go from there, and how and where she can earn a living she doesn't know; but she is firmly determined to try to make her own way. Shall I call her back? Perhaps it isn't too late. The poor girl looked terribly ill. Father, I'm worried about her. Truly, I am.

EBEN. Call her back? (He hesitates.) Well, as matters stand perhaps it would be jest as well. She's quick-tempered and unhappy, and so probably didn't mean half she said to me. And now that you speak of it, I did notice that she looked pale and sick-like. I dare say they've made her work pretty hard out there in California; and the news of her mother's death is a sad blow to her—a terrible sad blow. I suppose we must make allowances. Like as not her movie-picture experience has taught her a good lesson. In the future she'll—(There is a sound of disturbance without.) What is that? (They listen. Steps are heard. Bert enters. His face shows that something tragic has happened.)

EBEN. What's wrong, Bert? (Bert hesitates.) What is it? Speak out, man.

BERT. Harriet, sir.

EBEN. What of Harriet?

BERT. The well—she's fallen into the open well.

EBEN. Fallen into the well! (He starts for the door.)

BERT. (putting his hand upon him). It's too late, sir.

EBEN. Too late!

BERT. She's drowned.

EBEN. Drowned!

(Eben stands like one stunned. Caroline with a moan sinks half fainting into a chair.)

BERT. As I was crossin' the garden, after fixin' the lock on the barn door, I heard a stifled groan. It seemed to come from the old well. (The stir and the sound of voices without come closer and closer during this speech.) I hurried to the spot and found that I was right. Henry Williams was

a-comin' down the road. He see there was trouble and come right on over. We got her out, but it was too late. Neck's broken, I fear. She must 'a' tried to take the short cut across yer wife's old garden and in the twilight failed to see the well. It's jest as I was a-sayin' to Caroline — unused wells 're like old beliefs: they ought to be got rid of before they become a menace and a danger. (Footsteps are heard near at hand.) They're bringin' in the body now.

EBEN. (transfixed with horror and broken with grief). My God, what have I done to bring thy wrath upon me—what have I done? Two taken—two!

(Caroline goes to the hallway, and when she sees the form of her dead sister cries out.)

CAROLINE. Harriet, oh Harriet, speak to me!

EBEN. Oh, God, forgive me if I have been blind. Open my eyes and give me light. (He sinks to his knees in prayer. The curtain closes quietly before the body of Harriet is brought within view of the audience.)

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